

Wildlife Diversity News

A Publication of the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program

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The Spring Run Research Project

What kind of grassland do birds like best?

Many of you may not realize that the Spirit Lake area provides more than just great boating and fishing. Slightly southeast of Spirit Lake is an almost 15 square mile area of publicly owned wetlands and grasslands called the Spring Run Complex which attracts all kinds of wildlife, especially birds. The complex is comprised of wetlands/shallow marsh (>1000 acres), areas planted with introduced legumes and grasses (>1000 acres), old fields (>300 acres), cropland (>300 acres) and native prairie (>200 acres). Spring Run is also designated as an Audubon Important Bird Area and a Wetland Bird Conservation Area.

Many of the grassland areas, both native and non-native, are currently part of a research project looking at what types of vegetation are best for grassland birds. Some bird species being studied are Dickcissels, Bobolinks, Sedge Wrens, Red-winged Blackbirds and Ring-necked Pheasants. The study focuses on which of three types of planted vegetation are best for these species: 1) smooth brome, 2) a mixture of five native prairie grasses, or 3) a diverse mix of native prairie vegetation.

Each vegetation type is being evaluated using several different techniques.



Collecting insect data on one of the Spring Run Study Areas.

First of all, the number of adults of all bird species inhabiting each field is recorded. Secondly, nest success of a few of the bird species is looked at to see if a particular type of vegetation makes it easier for the birds to raise a family. Additionally, the food available for birds is being evaluated by collecting insects (which make up a large part of their diet) on each field.

This project will greatly assist the DNR by informing us what type of vegetation is best to plant on public lands. We will be able to tailor resources into plantings that best benefit declining grassland bird species as well as an important game species. The research is being made possible by the State Wildlife Grants program which provides \$600,000 to \$975,000 every year from the

federal government for special projects that could never be done without it.

So the next time you visit Spirit Lake, be sure to also visit the Spring Run complex and enjoy all the birds!

- Stephanie Shepherd
Surveys & Data Coordinator

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Help Iowa's Natural Resources!

Your dollars will support:

- Peregrine Falcon, Osprey and Trumpeter Swan restoration
- Assisting Species that Most Need Help
- Conservation of Important Habitat
- Wildlife Conservation Education

Tax Checkoff Reminder

Donate part or all of your tax refund to the Fish and Wildlife Fund and your money is for the birds and frogs and butterflies and....

Every penny of your donation goes to the Wildlife Diversity Program.

Notes from the Catbird Seat

According to Wikipedia, the “catbird seat” is an idiomatic phrase used to describe an “enviable position”. Often, my position as Wildlife Diversity Program Coordinator is not all that enviable, because it involves far too many administrative headaches and far too few enjoyable field experiences.

A good example is dealing with some current budget woes involving the DNR's Fish & Wildlife Trust Fund. This past year's harsh winter, record floods, high fuel prices and several other untimely events created a “perfect storm” that has left Wildlife, Fisheries and Law Enforcement short on funds. That trickles down to our Wildlife Diversity Program as well, and belt-tightening is now the order of the day. We have been asked to reduce operational costs by 7% this fiscal year. In the WDP, we don't have many things we can cut, except for services to the public. Therefore, we may not be able to send staff to some events this winter and spring, in order to reduce travel costs. We regret this reduction in services, and we hope it may be short-lived, but we'll have to live with it as long as necessary. In any case, this illustrates the *urgent* need to seek increased, permanent, protected funding for all of Iowa's natural resources.

I still manage to escape the office on occasion and was able to assist our Multi-Species Inventory and Monitoring program by doing weekly migratory bird point counts at Harrier Marsh Wildlife Area. I hit the area during what must have been a peak of sparrow migration, as I've never before encountered such an abundance of Swamp, Savanna and LeConte's Sparrows, along with lesser numbers of several other grassland sparrows. It's an experience like that that makes the administrative headaches somehow all worthwhile!

Speaking of birds, in the near future we will be releasing, in partnership with several other agencies, a new birding trail guide for central Iowa. Started in 2005, the project was mothballed for a year then reactivated in 2007. We'd hoped to have a publication printed and distributed by mid-summer, but June's floods forced project staff to turn attention towards coping with and recovering from the disaster. Now we're back on track, with text and photos all written and maps nearing completion. This birding “trail” will feature stops at about 25 great birding areas all roughly a 45-minute drive from Des Moines, each to be marked on-site with a special birding trail logo and watchable wildlife signs. While not featuring *all* the best birding locations in central Iowa, the selected sites will be very representative of the region's top birding areas.

This will increase to four the number of designated birding trails in Iowa. Others include the Mississippi River corridor, Iowa Great Lakes Region and the Loess Hills. Primary agency partners in the latest project include Polk County Conservation Board, Iowa DNR, US Fish & Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Other county conservation boards, Iowa Audubon and the Iowa Ornithologists' Union also have teamed with the lead agencies to make this a reality. Stay tuned for final announcements later this fall or winter.

Finally, don't forget to partake of some of the fun “citizen-science” events coming up, including Christmas Bird Counts and February's Great Backyard Bird Count. These are great ways to stay connected with wildlife during our long winter months.

- Doug Harr
Wildlife Diversity Program
Coordinator

Christmas Bird Counts



Dec. 14, 2008 to Jan. 5, 2009

For more information about the Christmas Bird Counts, go to:
<http://www.audubon.org/Bird/cbc/>

To look for a count near you, visit the Audubon site above or:
<http://www.iowabirds.org/birds/>
and click on Christmas Bird Counts

Great Backyard Bird Count



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Feb. 13-16, 2009

To learn more about participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count, go to:
<http://www.birdcount.org/>



Iowa's Teaming With Wildlife Coalition
Over 230 groups working together to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered.

24 Years of Hawk Watch at Effigy Mounds

October 4-5 was the 24th annual Hawk Watch Weekend at Effigy Mounds National Monument in northeast Iowa. The event is coordinated by the Upper Iowa Audubon Society, with help and participation from the Iowa DNR, Effigy Mounds National Monument staff, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, SOAR (Saving Our Avian Resources), and individual volunteers.

The official migration count site was just outside the Visitor Center. DNR staff, Audubon members, and other volunteers identified and counted wild migrants as they flew overhead. Several birds were trapped, banded, and released at the banding station approximately one mile from the Visitor Center. On Saturday afternoon, two spotting scopes were set up at Fire Point to give visitors a "bird's eye" view of the Mississippi flyway.

The official count totals for the weekend

were as follows:

Turkey Vulture - 66
Northern Goshawk - 1
Sharp-shinned Hawk - 10
Cooper's Hawk - 13
Unknown Accipiter - 5
Red-tailed Hawk - 26
Bald Eagle - 42
(22 adult, 20 immature)
Peregrine Falcon - 1
Merlin - 1
American Kestrel - 1

A golden eagle was seen at the banding station but not at the official count site, so unfortunately it could not be included in the total tally.

In addition to watching for migrating raptors, there were many family-oriented activities available. Visitors could dissect owl pellets, make a falconry wrist band, create raptor chalk drawings, and put together predator-prey nesting dolls. Throughout the day



An immature red-tailed hawk is banded and released.

there were also educational presentations and live bird programs.

Thanks to everyone who came out, and we look forward to seeing you next year!

- Jenni Dyer
AmeriCorps Wildlife Diversity
Research Assistant

Wandering Falcon Stays Put in Iowa



The peregrine falcon's scientific name, *Falco peregrinus*, means 'wandering falcon' in Latin, and for good reason – peregrines nesting in the Arctic are known to migrate to Central and South America for the winter! Peregrines disappeared from Iowa in the 1950s and 60s; in 1989 efforts to return the Peregrine Falcon to Iowa began. In 2008, there were thirteen territories and eight successful nests produced 20 young.

The city of Des Moines has two peregrine territories – downtown and around the Capitol building. Three young hatched at the American Republic Insurance building. The male of the pair has been on this territory for 16 years (peregrines typically live 6-8 years but have been known to live up to 20). The State Capitol pair produced two young. Other nest sites were at the US Bank building in Cedar Rapids (2 fledged), Alliant Energy plant in Lansing (3), Waukon Junction (3), Quad Cities Mid-American Energy building (1), Louisa Generating Station (4), and the Great

River Bridge in Burlington (2).

In Iowa, the peregrine project is spearheaded by the DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program and funded by the purchase of REAP/Natural Resources license plates and donations to the Fish and Wildlife Protection Fund Checkoff (formerly called the Chickadee Checkoff) on the state tax form. Conservation groups, businesses, schools and individuals have contributed as well.

- Pat Schlarbaum
Species Restoration & Outreach
Coordinator



Second Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas Update

As the year winds down and the birds become quieter, we now have the time to look back and reminisce about our progress in the first year of the BBA. The Second Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas is off to a tremendous start thanks to many volunteers and their dedication. Their efforts have helped us collect over 1300 hours of observation, work in nearly 360 blocks, and record around 180 species of birds in the first year. This is a great accomplishment! We couldn't have done it without their time and vigilance. Whether it was one record or hundreds, **every** report is important in documenting Iowa's breeding birds. This information is extremely valuable, and the data collected will ultimately protect our feathered friends.

The **Second Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas** is a five-year project, which began this year (2008), and will continue through the 2012 breeding season. It is sponsored by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. There are a total of 791 3x3 mile blocks statewide, and our

goal is to have each of these blocks sufficiently surveyed (20 hours of observation in each block) at the end of the five-year period. The first Breeding Bird Atlas took place from 1985-1990, and a book was published in 1995. However, with 861 blocks, only 611 were actually completed at the end of the six years. This time around, with a lower number of blocks and a growing "birding" community, we hope to complete ALL 791 blocks which will produce an updated catalog and current distribution of nesting birds within the state.

The Breeding Bird Atlas invites everyone to participate, from beginning to expert birders. Atlasing is a great way to enhance your birding skills and gives you a chance to explore different parts of Iowa and its birdlife. Participating in the BBA may be a new and exciting experience for many birders, because the focus is more on birds' breeding/nesting behavior than the number of individual species found in an area. Everyone has the opportunity to learn something new when participating in the

BBA! The Breeding Bird Atlas is a big project and its success will depend on many volunteers, like you, throughout the state of Iowa.

For more information on where blocks are located and how you can get started, visit the website <http://bba.iowabirds.org> or contact the BBA Coordinator at the address or phone number below.

Nicki Nagl
AmeriCorps, BBA Coordinator
Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources
Boone Wildlife Research Station
1436 255th Street
Boone, IA 50036
Office: (515) 432-2823
Cell: (515) 298-3072



Photo Credit: Carl Kurtz

For more information and to join the effort, go to:

<http://bba.iowabirds.org/>

DNR Now Accepting Applications for 2009 Natural Resource Aides

The Iowa DNR is already accepting applications to fill our seasonal (i.e. temporary) field positions in 2009. Applications will be accepted until January 9th, and selected applicants will be contacted after that date for interviews.

For more information please visit <http://www.iowa.gov/das/hre/iowa.jobs.html> and search openings for Wildlife (our positions are in wildlife research, but management has openings too!) or Fisheries.

Keep visiting the site to see when positions in our other bureaus are posted!



Visit

<http://www.iowa.gov/das/hre/iowa.jobs.html>
to search for openings!

Osprey Nest Despite Flooding

Although historically there are accounts of osprey nesting in Iowa, no successful nesting had been documented since European settlement. Like many other raptors, the osprey population plummeted in the 1950s due to the use of DDT. Osprey numbers have been gradually growing since its ban in 1972. However, because osprey return to the area where they fledged (grew flight feathers) to nest, most of the population has remained within the areas that were footholds during the DDT crash. When those areas become saturated with osprey, they produce fewer young rather than expand their territory. As a result, much of the osprey's historical range lacks osprey today.

Since 1997, the DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program has assisted conservation partners to release 209 osprey in Iowa. Ten osprey each were relocated from Minnesota and Wisconsin in 2008 and released at five sites – Clear Lake (Cerro

Gordo county), Whiterock Conservancy (Guthrie), Elk Rock State Park (Marion), Spirit Lake (Dickinson), and Mud Lake (Dubuque). All osprey released or hatched in Iowa have two bands, a silver US Fish & Wildlife silver band and a numbered colored band – lavender for relocated birds and green for Iowa-hatched birds.

2003 brought the first successful osprey nesting in Iowa in over a century and occurred at both Spirit Lake in Dickinson county and MacBride Raptor Project in Johnson county. In 2008, there were eleven nest attempts with two successful nests producing six young, bringing the total count to 16 nests and 33 wild-produced young. The storms and flooding of June resulted in unsuccessful nesting attempts at Wickiup Hill, Rathbun Lake, MacBride, and Don Williams Lake. However, a new nesting pair was discovered just south of Sioux City in Woodbury county; they successfully



fledged three young (thanks to Jerry Von Ehwegen for this information). Three young from the nest at Jester Park were rescued just before the nest flooded over. All three survived and were taken to Saving Our Avian Resources in Dedham for care; two were released at Whiterock Conservancy.

- Pat Schlarbaum
Species Restoration & Outreach
Coordinator

Volunteer Wildlife Monitoring Program Schedule

Bird Nest Monitoring Workshops (for Raptors and Colonial Waterbirds):

March 14, 2009 – Carroll, IA
Carroll County Conservation Board Education Center

March 21, 2009 – Calmar, IA in Winneshiek County
Northeastern Iowa Community College Campus

Frog and Toad Call Survey Workshops:

March 7, 2009 – Centerville, IA
Appanoose County Conservation Boards, Center 2000 at Sharon Bluff State Park

March 15, 2009 – Carroll, IA
Carroll County Conservation Board Education Center

March 22, 2009 – Calmar, IA in Winneshiek County
Northeastern Iowa Community College Campus

Pre-registration and a small fee are required for all workshops.
For more information please visit our website:

<http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/diversity/vwmp.html>



Of Bald Eagles & Barn Owls

Thanks to recent efforts from Wildlife Diversity biologist Stephanie Shepherd, all known bald eagle nests from 1977 to present are now recorded in the Bald Eagle Nest Database. Currently, there are records for 365 territories encompassing 435 nests in 84 of Iowa's 99 counties. The most recent counties to report nests were Lee, Davis, Pottawattamie, and Harrison. Of the eagle territories in the database, 167 are classified as active during the last three years; the status is unknown for 116. There may have been well over 200 active nests during 2008, but because the Wildlife Diversity Program is unable to monitor Iowa's eagle nests to the extent we once did, we do not know for sure.

This year's very wet and windy spring did take its toll on several eagle nests, but the good news is adult bald eagles returned and built replacements nearby.

In addition, reports began arriving in October of eagles building new nests or adding to old ones – a good sign for the upcoming nesting season. Since the DNR relies heavily on volunteers to report eagle nest activity, we very much appreciate any information you can provide about our nesting eagles. Reports from caring conservationists turn up about 15 new eagle nests each year. If you have information about an eagle nest, please go to <http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/diversity/> and click on Reporting Bald Eagles.

Next, I want to mention this year's sightings and nest reports for Iowa's Endangered Barn Owl. After several years of mild winters, barn owl numbers were growing steadily, with 7 nests reported in 2005 and 8 in 2006. In 2007, rainy weather may have slowed nesting down with only 3 nests reported, but there were still barn owls sighted in at

least 10 counties. The harsh winter of 2007-08, followed by record amounts of rainfall in spring and summer, may have led to further declines in the number of barn owls reported. This year, 3 barn owl nests were reported - 1 nest each in Carroll, Lucas, and Greene counties. Single bird reports were also received from Des Moines, Jefferson, and Tama counties. We are hopeful this winter will be more mild than last. If that happens, we expect a better nesting year for barn owls in 2009. As with Bald Eagles, the Wildlife Diversity Program very much encourages folks to report Barn Owl nests and sightings.

- Bruce Ehresman
Avian Ecologist



Photo Credit: Matt Wetrich

WANTED: Barn Owl Sightings!

The Barn Owl is an Iowa Endangered Species. It is a medium sized owl with a mostly white underside and a more cinnamon colored back and upperside. It has a distinctive heart-shaped face and dark eyes. When disturbed, it often emits a high-pitched piercing scream.

**Please report any sightings of this rare animal to the Iowa DNR's
Wildlife Diversity Program at (515) 432-2823.**

Please note the day and exact location of where the animal was seen.

Last Look

A close-up of an immature Cooper's Hawk caught during Hawk Watch at Effigy Mounds.

Birds are banded and released; reports of banded birds help to monitor population trends and migration patterns.

Photo Credit: Pat Schlarbaum



A Publication of the:



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2009 Bald Eagle Appreciation Days

Many Bald Eagles migrate to Iowa for the winter. Come out and enjoy them at one (or several) of the Bald Eagle events held this winter!

Weekends Jan. 3 - Feb. 14:
Mississippi River Visitor's Center, Rock Island, IL

January 3: Clinton, IA

January 10: Muscatine, IA

January 10-11: Quad Cities, IA/IL

January 17: Dubuque, IA

January 17-18: Keokuk, IA
Keokuk's 25th anniversary bald eagle watch!

January 23: Des Moines, IA
Lunch with the Eagles

January 24-25: LeClaire, IA

February 14-15: Omaha, NE

February 22: Saylorville Lake, Polk Co., IA

February 28: Prairie du Chien, WI

March 6-7: Lake Red Rock, Marion Co., IA

March 7: Linn Grove, IA

For more information, go to:

<http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/diversity/events.html>

Or

<http://www.missriver.org/>